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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 006473

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR SA
SUBJECT: RIYADH RECORD: JULY 30-AUGUST 4

REF: A. A) RIYADH 6040

- 1B. B) RIYADH 6339
- 1C. C) RIYADH 6101
- 1D. D) JEDDAH 494.

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The SAG provided humanitarian assistance to victims of the crisis in Lebanon through air and land convoys as well as increased financial assistance. The Saudi public's discontent increased with the SAG's perceived support for U.S. policy in Lebanon, and protesters of U.S. support for Israel called for a boycott of U.S. consumer goods in the Kingdom. The SAG lifted the ban on public photography, issued a decree allowing female engineers to open their own offices, and allowed the screening of movies at a literary club in Riyadh. King Abdullah received Jordan's King Abdullah II for a two-day visit to discuss the crisis in Lebanon; he also engaged in various correspondence with regional leaders calling for a coordinated Arab stance following the Qana massacre.

Lebanon Crisis: Humanitarian Assistance and Saudi Reaction

12. (C) Post played an instrumental role in assisting a Saudi humanitarian relief convoy to travel safely to Lebanon. The convoy, which arrived in Beirut on July 30 following an overland crossing from Syria, consisted of 22 vehicles, including mobile hospital units (Ref A). Additionally, two SAG planes carrying 24 tons of medical supplies and foodstuffs arrived in Beirut on August 2. There has been continued financial assistance provided by the Saudi public following directives by King Abdullah for a public donation campaign to provide support to the Lebanese people, including a \$2 million donation by the Saudi corporation SABIC.

13. (C) On July 31, two prominent conservative websites posted calls for a boycott on U.S. consumer goods, ranging from fast-food franchises to shampoo brands, to begin on August 4, in addition to an ongoing cellular telephone text messaging campaign. This call for a boycott is the first in Saudi Arabia on U.S. products since the 2003 Iraq invasion, and follows a 2005 successful boycott on Danish products. It was widely debated how effective the boycott was due to the sheer volume and popularity of U.S. goods in the Kingdom. But its initiation suggests that the Saudi public's displeasure with the U.S.'s foreign policy towards the Lebanon crisis is increasing (Ref B, Ref C).

Domestic Reforms: Photography Ban Lifted, Female Engineers Operational, Movies Aired

¶4. (C) In a bid to promote tourism, the SAG lifted a ban on photography in public places. Although the lifting of the ban was announced last year, the Ministry of Interior enacted it only this past week. A ban on photographing private property remains in place, which includes royal palaces and individuals, unless the photographer has express permission. Religious conservatives were most likely responsible for the delay in its implementation, and they remain opposed to photography. Many have criticized the SAG for allowing the Saudi media to continue printing pictures of Saudi women. The King continues to loosen the reigns of conservatism in the Kingdom, particularly concerning economic advancement, even in the wake of mounting criticism by religious conservatives and the Saudi public's discontent with the crisis in Lebanon.

¶5. (C) On August 1, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced a decision to allow female engineers to open engineering offices. The Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Saudi Engineers Council (SEC) stated that the decree was issued and implemented in record time by the Ministry (in three months) and that the SEC expects over 100 engineering offices run by Saudi female engineers would be opened in ¶2006. Currently, there are 60 female members of the SEC, but they plan for increased membership based on the new decree. As is often the case in Saudi Arabia, targeted bureaucratic obstructions may impede the implementation of this decision and dampen the high expectations of the SEC (Ref D).

¶6. (U) On July 30, a Fiction Group at the Riyadh Literary Club organized a talk to air two short Saudi movies from the Jeddah Film Festival: "Taxi" and "The Last Piece." The screening, the first of its kind in Riyadh, had an audience of 40 males as well as the male directors of the films. Although no females were present, a paper on the movies by female critic Raja al-Mitrai was read in her absence. Additionally, the National Society for Human Rights, the official SAG human rights body, announced plans to produce five short films to be aired for the Saudi public as a means of educating both Saudis and expatriates on their rights under the law on topics including domestic violence, expatriate rights, children's rights, basic human rights and civil and social rights.

VIP Visits and Correspondence

¶7. (U) King Abdullah II of Jordan traveled to the Kingdom for a two-day visit to discuss Lebanon with Saudi King Abdullah, in addition to the Palestinian crisis, Iraq, and general bilateral relations issues. Also on July 30, Lebanese Prime Minister Fu'ad al-Saniora called King Abdullah to brief him on current events in Lebanon, including the details of the Qana massacre. Al-Saniora told the King that Lebanon will not hold peace talks before an immediate and unconditional cease-fire is established. King Abdullah expressed his support for the Lebanese position and gave assurances that Saudi Arabia will "stand by Lebanon in all circumstances." On August 2, King Abdullah sent a letter to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which commented on current Israeli aggression against the Palestinian and Lebanese people and stated that there was a need for coordination of Arab positions on solving this issue. Also, Iranian Majlis Speaker, Gholan Ali Haddad Adel, spoke by phone on July 30 with Saudi and Kuwaiti Majlis al-Shoura Speakers on the latest developments in Lebanon, specifically referring to the Qana massacre. All three parties condemned the "Zionist regime's brutal crimes in Qana."

OBERWETTER